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Book Pricing Update — Online Acquisitions Tools and Price

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Internet bookshops are successfully developing systems that make it easy for anybody worth a right-click (and a credit card) to practically just lean on the keyboard and wind up buying a couple books. And why not, since filling up a virtual shopping cart requires no reaching (save for the mouse), the aisles are uncrowded (depending on network speed), nothing gets damaged no matter how high the selections are stacked (apart from credit limits), and there are no embarrassing wobbly cart wheels or nosy cashiers online.

That such easy transactions are becoming routine may be just another indication of our postmodern world. On the other hand, electronic commerce's effortlessness alone doesn't necessarily make it a good thing, perhaps especially insofar as book-buying for libraries is concerned. Indeed, the better vendor Web-based interfaces are constructed, perhaps counter to the vendor's apparent interest in selling as many books as possible, to explicitly prevent anything close to impulse buying. Library vendors go to great pains and expense to mount electronic tables-of-contents and book jacket verbiage, to provide links where available to objective reviews, to list alternate editions side-by-side, and to indicate (where feasible/desirable) what other libraries are doing about a particular title. Vendors are compelled to do all this not so much for the purpose of enticement, but rather to present selection and/or acquisitions librarians with as much information about the book as possible so as to permit an informed and cautious purchase decision. Perhaps more often than vendors would prefer, that kind of enriched title information can and does persuade librarians away from titles. Which is fine, since booksellers' credibility depends just as much on steering libraries away from some titles as towards others.

Meanwhile, Web-based acquisitions tools blur heretofore distinct product lines - books tend to look alike online, whether vendors consider them to be approval books or notification slips or firm orders or standing orders - giving

greater impetus to librarians' interest in pricing consistency. Like library patrons asking reference librarians "do you have...?" when the question is really "can I get...?", librarians turn to online acquisitions tools looking more for answers about quality and availability and would rather not have to concern themselves with equivocations about price and discount. This leads to even greater pressure on vendors to afford the same discount for all the titles treated, represented, and ordered online, regardless of the quite legitimate finances behind different discount schedules offered to libraries for each of the vendors' order types. So, library booksellers are compelled to not only manage the day-to-day business of putting books in boxes, but they must also manage their way out of a dilemma (which is at least in part of their own making): how, when faced with decreasing discounts from publishers but rising discounts offered to customers, do they continue to invest in the development of e-ordering applications which are intended as much for collection management as sheer sales?

Just as the online retail bookshops have successfully off-loaded onto their customers some of the work done in bricks-and-mortar stores by staff (e.g., finding books, ringing them up at cash registers), library book vendors are hoping that their online applications will soon allow librarians to help themselves to services that are currently provided by vendor staff, such as management reports, back runs, cost estimates, and, perhaps most notably, notification slips. Notification slips can amount to a maddeningly expensive form of advertising: some vendors estimate that each notification slip costs upwards of \$.06 to produce and mail, and vendors produce and mail millions upon millions of them every year. If vendors can reduce the printing and mailing costs of notification slips by more efficiently creating and distributing their electronic equivalents via the Web, then librarians may enjoy more fully and more quickly developed online acquisitions tools. Use of electronic notifications is catching on, albeit slowly. Whereas some librar-

ies are fully wired and confident of the benefits of paperless notification products, other libraries want or need to keep the slips coming, and to remain at least partly "unplugged." Eventually, however, the cost of managing parallel systems -- for both the vendor and the library -- may become too high. Indeed, although the notification slips are generally provided to the library free of charge, libraries spend plenty of time and money receiving, sorting, distributing, sharing, and mailing back the paper slips. Indeed, the slips are sometimes subject to so much handling time that, given relatively short print runs these days, titles of interest may be unavailable by the time the order is received.

In any case, and for many obvious reasons, librarians still simply cannot afford to accidentally or even casually buy a book, and they therefore must rely on well-designed and well-intentioned online acquisitions tools to assist in efficient yet judicious procurement. As the online catalog has already subsumed most if not all of the manual searching functions in public services, so online acquisitions tools may eventually replace most if not all manual selection and acquisitions functions. Happily, librarians and book vendors enjoy a long history of collaboration, routinely matching library workflow with vendor applications. Librarians and vendors can depend on these sustained partnerships for mutual guidance regarding appropriate online interfaces and services, as well as price. 🐷

